

Little Earth of United Tribes  
Towards Facilitating a Thriving Community

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<b><u>Table of Contents</u></b>	<b><u>Page</u></b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
Little Earth Community	6
Omniciye'	8
Native Americans as a minority group in Minnesota	9
Urban American Indian Population in the Twin Cities	11
<b>Problem Statement and Research Scope</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Research Methodology</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Literature Review</b>	<b>14</b>
Health Care	14
Housing and Urban Development (HUD)	15
Childcare Assistance	16
Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF)	18
Food and Nutrition Assistance	20
Food Stamp Program	22
Welfare and Welfare Reform	23
Long Term Joblessness	25
Urban American Indians	26
Poverty and Economic Perspectives	28
<b>Training Manual Analysis</b>	<b>29</b>
The complex Public Assistance Process	29
Analysis of the Public Assistance Programs	31
<b>Demographic Stakeholder and Survey Analysis</b>	<b>33</b>
Analysis of the Little Earth Survey	33
Types of benefits accessed by Little Earth residents	33
Number of Children in Family	34
Duration of employment	35
Level of education	36
Reason for leaving the job	37
Perceptions about Public Assistance Programs	38
<b>Recommendations for Future Action Plans</b>	<b>39</b>
Proposals for Little Earth	39
Proposals for Omniciye'	42
Proposals for Policy Makers	44
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Recommendation for Further Study</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>49</b>

## **Executive Summary**

In early 2014, the leadership team from the Little Earth of United Tribes approached the Humphrey School. Their goal was to find Humphrey researchers who could identify and examine possible disincentives to employment and higher education for Little Earth Residents. The team that chose this Little Earth project is comprised of an International group of Mid-Career Master of Public Affairs students including two officials from the Government of India, one International student from Mexico City, and one American. This is their capstone paper. With time constraints and program limitations, the team chose to focus on one area—possible disincentives to employment—while recommending continued capstone research projects that could focus on higher education in the future.

The capstone team's research revealed some very clear disincentives to employment as a result of guidelines, requirements, and sanctions that serve as parameters for receiving support from the Minnesota Family Investment program (MFIP), the Child Assistance program, and related systems. Research also revealed some deeper root-cause issues that serve not only as potential disincentives to employment, but prevent certain marginalized populations—like the residents of Little Earth—from even attempting to access any support from the available public assistance benefits.

Key findings from the Humphrey Capstone team identified multiple cultural barriers that keep Urban American Indians from seeking assistance. A long history of trauma and mistreatment—government policies of forced assimilation and related issues—has caused a high level of distrust for any government affiliated programs. Add to that the discrimination and racialized assumptions this population has directly experienced from caseworkers, and it is clear that innovative, culturally aware interventions are required if there is going to be any hope of successfully reaching this unique population. In addition to the cultural issues, research evidence indicates that the application process and procedures are complicated, confusing, and time intensive, income limitations and program parameters act as employment disincentives, and employers often discriminate either through racially biased assumptions, or through their hiring practices of eliminating applicants with gaps in employment or records of incarceration.

Little Earth's Omniciye' program, which was designed specifically to serve Little Earth residents, has made significant headway in addressing these issues of distrust and bias. This innovative on-site, culturally specific program should serve as a national model that works to build genuine relationships with client families in ways that help them end the cycle of poverty. In 2010, when the program began, Omniciye' had a goal of supporting the 50 neediest families in the community. Today, Omniciye' is

successfully working with 43 families with intentions to expand the program incrementally.

Humphrey Team proposals include a series of recommendations focusing on three primary stakeholder groups: Little Earth, Omniciye', and Policy Makers. Recommendations for the Little Earth Community include taking time to reflect and celebrate their programs, which are innovative and effective. Their leadership team understands the needs of the community and they work diligently in support of that community model. Our research revealed a consistent pattern of needs for this urban American Indian community, including stable housing, on-site support systems, cultural connections, and culturally aware staff. The listed needs are all areas that the Little Earth leadership continues to focus on. They demonstrate clear intentions to create and improve upon innovative support systems for all Little Earth families. This combination of programs has the potential to be a national model that can and should be replicated.

Additional recommendations for Little Earth include adding more programmatic initiatives such as wealth building, finance, and budgeting workshops for residents, training client navigators who are members of the community, and developing a mentor program whereby elders can engage with youth in ways that provide continued cultural connections. From an operations perspective the Humphrey team suggests that it would be useful to maintain a more up-to-date and more easily accessible database of residents that tracks their progress as they transition out of public assistance support

programs. This kind of tracking can help Little Earth leadership share success stories and adapt programmatic initiatives where needed.

Recommendations for the Omniciye' program include moving forward with plans to expand capacity. As mentioned, 43 of the neediest families were the first priority, now as those families begin to stabilize it will be important to engage more of the 212 families living in the Little Earth community. With such a finite number of families, incremental increases can be managed effectively. One major area of concern that this study detected related to Omniciye', is that their entry door remains locked during regular business hours. This is apparently a data privacy requirement, but perhaps one way to work around that issue would be to have a trained client navigator stationed outside of the entry, someone who is available to greet clients and help them gain access to the space.

For policy makers, the Humphrey team suggests allowing site-specific programs like Omniciye' to have more autonomy. The Omniciye' "Life Coaches" are often bound by restrictive policies and guidelines that prevent them from fully supporting the needs of the Little Earth families. Omniciye' is an innovative site-specific model that can serve as a developmental tool for caseworkers statewide. Additionally, cultural sensitivity and awareness for all caseworkers has been identified as a major concern for marginalized communities including residents of Little Earth. The Humphrey team suggests that

continued mandatory development programs that incorporate cultural awareness should become a regular part of staff training programs.

## **Introduction**

### **The Little Earth Community**

For more than four decades, the Little Earth of United Tribes has been a support hub for American Indians seeking culturally specific urban housing in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. Today, Little Earth remains one of a kind. It is the only American Indian preference, project-based, Section 8 rental assistance community in the United States (Little Earth History, 2014). In addition to housing, Little Earth offers several other assistance and support programs aimed at establishing a healthy, thriving, urban American Indian community.

From its inception in 1973 until 1975 the organization called Little Earth faced significant hardship. Constant financial and management problems led to some early challenges, but with help from the city of Minneapolis and Hennepin County, along with the proven leadership of the American Indian Movement (AIM), the project was reinvigorated. Gaining federal government support through Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the city of Minneapolis, recognizing this as an urgent need, prioritized the project. Working together with AIM leadership, a new non-profit incorporation named the “Little Earth of United Tribes Housing Corporation” was established in 1975 (Little Earth History, 2014).



Today, Little Earth is a 9.4-acre, 212-unit HUD-subsidized housing complex in the heart of Minneapolis. This community is home to approximately 1,000 occupants of which 50% are under the age of 21. Little Earth is recognized as an innovator in providing educational, cultural, and social programs to urban American Indians. In addition, collaboration with Hennepin County was created to provide culturally specific support services to residents through an innovative program called Omniciye’.

Data collected by the Minnesota Department of Human Services demonstrates clear racial disparities in successful outcomes for the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), which is Minnesota’s version of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families federal program. It provides financial support to needy children and families, and is subsidized by the federal government. Their research brief—which is a published report outlining key findings from statewide research—characterizes this disparity as “a very large and enduring gap” for American Indians, with their Self-Support Index scale demonstrating a consistent 19 percentage point gap between American Indians and most other racial and ethnic groups, with rates of success parallel to that of African American’s in the same index (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2011).

For MFIP purposes, success is defined as “working in paid employment for an average of 30 or more hours per week or being off the cash portion of the MFIP program three years after a baseline eligibility quarter” (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2011). It is interesting to note that this definition of “success” is not

necessarily defined by rate of pay, as working 30 hours a week at a minimum wage job will not bring a family above the poverty line.

Little Earth has found some success with current program implementations specifically designed to reduce or eliminate the social, economic, and psychological challenges their residents face on a daily basis. However, Little Earth leadership, support staff, and residents recognize a need for continued improvement. They seek innovative yet practical “common sense” solutions to the challenges their residents face in emerging from public assistance to full employment.

### **Omniciye’**

Omniciye’—meaning—“coming together for a common purpose” in the Lakota language—is a site-specific county office located on the Little Earth property. Omniciye’ currently serves 43 families. Using a wellness wheel model, the Omniciye’ program provides life coaches that help families develop their own plan to balance mind, body, and spirit in ways that lead to self-sufficiency (Hennepin County, 2014). Little Earth residents face many difficulties, including poverty, high crime and unemployment rates, low high school graduation rates, alcohol and drug abuse issues, and chronic health issues. According to demographics provided by Little Earth staff, 98% of their households are very low income and 47% of head of these households are unemployed (Little Earth History, 2014).

Omniciye' was created as a partnership between Little Earth and Hennepin County to offer access to Hennepin County services exclusively for Little Earth residents. Its main purpose is to provide Little Earth families with the encouragement, the resources and the support to achieve self-sufficiency while maintaining good health. One of Omniciye's advantages over other support programs is that it provides integrated service delivery on-site. The Omniciye' site is housed within the Little Earth Neighborhood Early Learning Center building in the Phillips neighborhood and directly across the street from Little Earth housing units. This location includes on-going personal contact, asset-based coaching, counseling, referral and crisis support. In addition, Omniciye' provides access to public assistance programs like cash, food, medical assistance, and emergency assistance that are administered by Hennepin County. The partnership includes \$350,000 in programmatic support dollars plus in-kind staff support.

### **Native Americans as a Minority Group in Minnesota**

By the 1600s there were two main groups of people living in what is now known as Minnesota: the Dakota and Ojibwe. These two main groups of people were drawn to the area by its extensive waterways, which were not only sacred spaces, but they were also used for transportation, and food gathering. Given these geographical advantages, the Dakota and Ojibwe populations had extensive trade relationships with other native people in the area. Currently in Minnesota there are seven reservations of the northern

Anishinaabe nation, also known as Chippewa, and four Dakota communities. A reservation or community is a portion of land that belongs to one or more groups of American Indians. It is important to clarify that this land was not given to this population by the federal government. On the contrary, this land was essentially considered wasteland—what was left for American Indians after relinquishing the tribes' original homelands to the federal government through treaties or agreements, and then being forcibly removed to these reservation lands.

(<http://www.historicfortsnelling.org/history/american-indians>).

According to the 2010 Census, the United States is home to 5.2 million Native Americans. In 2010 the Census reported that the State of Minnesota had 60,916 Native Americans, which represented 1.1% of the total state population (Census 2010). Studies continue to demonstrate that poverty, unemployment, and low education rates are consistently higher in urban American Indian populations than is observed in their dominant culture counterparts (Westat, 2014). A large percentage of this population has moved from reservations to urban communities, like the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, to look for better economic opportunities that were not present on or near reservations. The projected population of American Indians in 2060 is 11.6 million (Census, 2010). This growing population will continue to be affected by poverty and lack of opportunities stemming from a series of historical and circumstantial reasons.

## **Urban American Indian Population in the Twin Cities**

Most Native Americans who have migrated from greater Minnesota to the urban environment of the Twin Cities are located in the Phillips neighborhood of South Minneapolis. Almost 70 % of residents in this neighborhood are part of a minority represented by three major ethnic groups: Black (29%), Hispanic (22%), and American Indian (12%). The Phillips neighborhood became a prime destination for many Native Americans as a result of the Indian Relocation Program from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which ran from 1948 through 1980 (Child, 2007). The program was initially intended to transition Native Americans out of poverty. Additionally, some supporters of the program thought that the Relocation Program offered Indians an escape from impoverished conditions on reservations, expecting that it would give them and their families an opportunity to live the American dream (Anderson, et al., 2009). However, recent studies acknowledge that while 66% of American Indians now live in urban areas, poverty rates remain very high (Pember, 2008). In the Phillips Neighborhood more than 45% of residents live below the poverty line while the same rate for all of Minneapolis is just over 23%. The city of Minneapolis labor force data indicates that unemployment levels for this community consistently remain nearly 10 percentage points higher than overall Minneapolis unemployment rates (Minneapolis Labor Force Statistics, 2011).

The fast growth of American Indians in the city of Minneapolis, and particularly in the Phillips neighborhood, has attracted federal funding which led to the development of both the Little Earth community and the Minneapolis American Indian Center. As mentioned before, the Little Earth community residence is the only public housing project in the United States that gives a preference to Native Americans.

### **Problem Statement and Research Scope**

The fundamental intention of this study was to assess the challenges and circumstances of Little Earth residents related to long-term joblessness. The information gathered will inform how a particular marginalized and disadvantaged population experiences and interacts with services and programs funded by the local or federal government. Based on the findings, we generated recommendations and actions to facilitate better opportunities for Little Earth residents that will help them overcome the difficulties derived from unemployment. The methodology used for this research will be explained in further detail under the Methodology segment of this paper. In addition to presenting findings and recommendations, the qualitative information gathered in this research could be used as a starting point and guideline for future research in this particular community.

### **Research Methodology**

For our research focus, the Humphrey team relied on four primary methods: Literature review, leadership team and stakeholder interviews, demographic and survey

data analysis, and training manual analysis. First, we conducted a comprehensive review of available literature on topic areas including: urban American Indians, migration history, cultural traditions, and Welfare programs. We also reviewed published studies and dissertations related to urban American Indian populations and welfare programs.

Since IRB restrictions prevented us from having direct contact with Little Earth residents, the research team met regularly with members of the Little Earth and Omniciye' leadership to get their perspectives and input, and to gather qualitative data that described lived experiences of Little Earth residents. Face to face meetings along with phone interviews of the leadership staff helped inform the research focus. As part of their regular program evaluation and needs assessment process, the Little Earth leadership team collects demographic data about their residents. They also regularly survey resident attitudes and practices to gauge the impact of services. For this study, the raw data from the demographic and survey collections was shared with the Humphrey team for analysis.

Finally, the Humphrey team interviewed Hennepin County staff members and analyzed the various Public Assistance Department of Humans Services training manuals to understand the rules, regulations, policies, and procedures that front line workers are required to follow.

## **Literature Review**

### **Barriers to Health Assistance**

Sonia Marrone (2007) reviewed disparities in health care services among indigenous populations with a specific focus on barriers to health care assistance. She concluded that the health status of indigenous populations, globally, tended to be much poorer than the majority populations. She identified several factors accounting for health disparities of indigenous populations, they include: socio-economic status, rural location, racism, cultural and communication differences.

### **Funding Health Care**

Samantha Artiga and Rachel Arguello (2013) concluded that while the federal government had a distinct responsibility to provide healthcare to American Indian and Alaska Natives (AIANs), many faced challenges accessing needed care and the population continued to experience poor health outcomes, including high rates of chronic diseases. They concluded that due to limited funding, the Indian Health Service of DHS was not able to meet the need for health care. They also concluded that AIANs had limited access to private health coverage due to their low income and limited employment patterns. Nancy Shoemaker in *Urban Indians and Ethnic Choices: American Indian Organizations in Minneapolis, 1920-1950*, has mentioned the role played by the American Indian Organizations in addressing the issues of education and welfare of American Indians.



## Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development was established in 1937 with the goal of improving living conditions for needy families. Today, their mission is “to create strong, sustainable, inclusive communities and quality affordable homes for all” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2014). HUD offers multiple programs aimed at nurturing economic and community development, enforcing fairness and equal opportunity in housing, managing public housing programs, administering federal mortgage insurance programs, and related housing support programs.

The Little Earth of United Tribes operates under the section 8 program for HUD assisted residents. Eligibility for section 8 housing is determined by a family’s annual income, and calculated as follows: *Gross Income - Income Exclusions = Annual Income*. These income calculations are also used to determine rental rates. The specific program for Little Earth residents is calculated using the “Section 236 Rent Formulas,” (HUD Section 8-236 Fact Sheet, 2007).

There are several income exclusions and/or deductions that are not calculated in the annual income formula. Some of those exclusions are: Income from minors (children under the age of 18), reimbursements for medical care, monies received from HUD sponsored training programs, monies received for participation in qualifying employment training programs.

## **Childcare Assistance Programs**

Under the various childcare assistance programs available in Minnesota, financial assistance is provided to low-income families for childcare so that parents can find employment or participate in job training programs. The support is intended to ensure that children are well cared for and school ready. Childcare assistance is available for children under the age of 13. Families with special needs children can receive support up to age 15 (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2014). Families receiving benefits under the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) or the Diversionary Work Program (DWP) get assistance under MFIP childcare assistance. Those families who have moved off the MFIP assistance programs can receive some childcare assistance under Transition Year (TY) or Transition Year Extension (TYE) Childcare Assistance programs. The families not participating in the above programs may get benefits under the Basic Sliding Fee (BSF) program for help with meeting the costs of childcare (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2014).

The Childcare Assistance benefits are available to families with an annual income at or below 67% of the State Median Income (SMI). However, for benefit under the Basic Sliding Fee Child Care Assistance, the annual income should be at or below 47% of the State Median Income (Minnesota Department of Human Resources 2014, Child Care Assistance Program Manual). The maximum admissible hourly, daily and

weekly reimbursement rates for Child Care Providers under the program in Hennepin County is as below:

(Minnesota Department of Human Resources 2014, Minnesota Child Care Assistance Program-Standard Maximum Rates)

Table 1:

	Independent Provider				Childcare centers			
	Infant	Toddler	Pre-School	School age	Infant	Toddler	Pre-School	School age
<b>Weekly</b>	162.99	156.17	141.96	131.45	268	225	201	186.14
<b>Hourly</b>	5.27	5.27	4.85	4.85	10	9	8	7.5
<b>Full Day</b>	36.81	34.7	31.55	31.01	86.24	64.15	57.84	53.74

Source: Minnesota DHS 2014, Minnesota Child Care Assistance Program-Standard Maximum Rates

The income eligibility criteria for benefits under the Childcare Assistance programs in the State of Minnesota are as follows (Minnesota Department of Human Resources 2014, Minnesota Child Care Assistance Program-Copayment Schedules):

Table-2:

Household size	State Median Annual Income (SMI)	47% or less of SMI	Maximum income 67% of SMI
Two person Household	59352	27895	36205
Three person Household	73318	34459	44724
Four Person Household	87283	41023	53243
Five person Household	101248	47587	61761

Six person Household	115214	54151	70281
Seven person Household	117832	55381	71878
Eight person Household	120451	56612	73475
Nine person Household	123069	57842	75072
Ten person Household	125688	59073	76670
Eleven person Household	128306	60304	78267
Twelve person Household	130925	61535	79864
Thirteen person Household	133543	62765	81461

Source: Minnesota DHS 2014, Minnesota Child Care Assistance Program-Copayment Schedules

This chart demonstrates that a household receives maximum benefit for childcare assistance when they have an income at or below 47% of the state median income (SMI). Benefits reduce drastically as income increases. The Maximum income for receiving the childcare assistance benefit is 67% of the SMI.

### **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families**

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) was created as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. It was created as a performance bonus to reward States for moving welfare recipients into jobs. Each State receives block grant allocations based on previous expenditures on unemployment tools. States have ample flexibility in managing and distributing TANF benefits, which include the ability to determine eligibility and benefit levels. As a first step for a potential beneficiary, states must make initial assessment of each applicant's skills and must develop personal responsibility plans that identify needed education,

training, and job placement services. The federal government has numerous incentives used to encourage states to maintain job search program spending levels.

TANF provides assistance and work opportunities to needy families by providing cash support based on need, income, resources, and family size (Social Security Bulletin [SSB], 2000). To be eligible for TANF cash benefits, the family, or unit, has to satisfy certain requirements. TANF works over limited periods of time. Nearly all recipients are required to work after 2 years of receiving this benefit. Federally, TANF establishes a maximum of 60 months or less as a time limit for funded cash assistance for adults. In cases where the only TANF recipients are children, there are no time limits. There are other restrictions such as maximum amount of assets a family may hold and still remain eligible for benefits.

### **TANF in Minnesota**

As mentioned previously, each state has the flexibility to establish its own eligibility rules for participants. For non-disabled families there are restrictions for two-parent family eligibility. Minnesota has a 60-month time limit for TANF cash recipients. Minnesota is the only state to use state funds to provide assistance to some non-qualified non-citizens. As of 2012, Minnesota has two standards for determining benefits. The first is named the Transitional Standard with a cash benefit for a family of three of \$1,005 per month, and the second benefit named the Family Wage Level with a maximum benefit of \$1,106 per month for a family of three.

Minnesota's transitional standard includes the food stamp allotment for each family or unit size. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and cash benefit are computed together for welfare recipients. The SNAP allotment is a flat benefit, based on family size, which is subtracted from the benefit amount. Any remaining benefit is given to the participant as cash. In Minnesota there are no behavioral requirements like school, immunization or health assessments to be eligible for TANF benefits.

### **Food and Nutrition Assistance**

The idea behind the food and nutrition assistance program is to provide children and their needy families access to a more healthful diet and a comprehensive nutrition education. The program is under the control of The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Consumer Services, who provide 15 Federal food and nutrition assistance programs. One of the programs offered is Food Stamps, which is considered the cornerstone of the USDA food assistance programs. All food programs are operated in a partnership between the Federal and State government, where the Federal government is responsible for food costs and it shares administrative costs with each of the 50 States' governments.

As with the TANF program, each State is responsible for determining the eligibility of needy families to participate in food assistance programs, in addition to the delivery of services to the recipients. States also have the responsibility to coordinate

USDA nutrition programs with local welfare and health care programs. The following is a list of Food and Nutrition programs:

- Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
- WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program
- National School Lunch Program
- School Breakfast Program
- Summer Food Service Program
- Child and Adult Care Food Program
- Commodity Supplemental Food program
- Special Milk Program
- Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations
- Nutrition Program for the Elderly
- Commodity Distribution to Charitable Institutions and to Soup Kitchens and Food Banks
- Nutrition Education and Training Program
- Nutrition Assistance Program in Puerto Rico and the Northern Mariana Islands

For the purpose of this study we will focus on the Food Stamp Program, which is one of the most used programs by Little Earth residents based on the data gathered by Little Earth staff.

## **Food Stamp Program**

This program has been offered since 1961, when it started as a pilot project. It was made permanent in 1964. The program began when Congress required all States to offer food stamps to low-income households. The program presents its highest demand in long periods of high unemployment, inflation, and recession ([www.socialsecurity.gov](http://www.socialsecurity.gov)).

In 1981, During the Reagan Administration, the Food Stamp Program went through a severe budget cut. For this reason, the nutrition education, now named Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - Education (SNAP - Ed) was established as an alternative food program in the United States. With this new program, each State can apply for matching funds from the federal government to deliver nutrition education to eligible families.

In the early 2000s significant changes were made to the Food Stamp Program and stamp participation increased dramatically, extending to qualified immigrants and children who were 18 years of age and younger. It was during this period that the stamps used for purchasing food transitioned into an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. The program works by giving a monthly allotment of coupons that can be retrieved at retail food stores, or providing benefits through EBT, which is used like a debit card to purchase food.



The SNAP program is currently serving more than 45 million Americans, making it the largest Federal food assistance program in the country today. It has been considered a critical safety net program with the potential to be the most important health and nutrition resource in America. In Minnesota SNAP eligibility depends on the needy family's income. Households with an income at or below 165% of the federal government baseline will be eligible for the benefit.

### **Welfare and Welfare Reform**

In her dissertation titled: "From Safety Net to Tight Rope: New Landscapes of Welfare in the United States" (2013), Rebecca Burnett closely examines how public assistance policies intersect with mainstream discourse around race, gender and poverty. She asserts that the very definition of poverty in the United States is shaped by our political focus on ending the "crisis of dependency on welfare" (p.4).

This focus on welfare dependency is a "victim blaming/shaming" model that assumes poverty is a result of pathological behaviors that can be corrected using social control methods (p.128). Burnett asserts, "Discussions on welfare are ultimately discussions about space, politics, identity and agency but these larger issues are hidden amidst the intense focus on the behaviors of those in poverty." (p.130). Under her examination, Burnett reveals the truth behind the thinly veiled "neutral" welfare debate, demonstrating that the real debate is about who belongs and who is excluded, who matters and who is discounted, who is valued and who is ignored in society.

In “The Color of Welfare Sanctioning: A Multilevel Analysis of Benefit Reductions and Case Closures Under Welfare Reform” (2008) Shannon Monnant borrows concepts from the realms of Critical Race Theory and intersectionality to examine welfare sanctioning and disproportionate impacts on how and why certain individuals leave welfare. Monnant contends that many studies acknowledge race and gender only as control variables for analysis, not recognizing that “...race, gender and class are important axes of oppression that intersect to create unique identities and experiences...” (p.4.)

According to Monnant, any meaningful analysis of welfare reform must recognize that those unique identities and experiences are core factors in how individuals perceive and engage in the world. Also, dominant cultures and worldviews actively maintain certain images and ideologies about the poor and increase the likelihood of sanctioning, particularly for individuals who seem to match those images (p.21). She believes that “A focus on how racism occurs on several levels and dimensions, and how racism changes in order to maintain white advantage is important in helping us to understand the role race and racism play in variation in TANF sanctioning” (p.30).

Kenneth Neubeck and Noel Cazenave go further to examine how racism negatively impacts the experience American Indians have with the welfare system and welfare reform. Their book “Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America’s Poor” says that while American Indians are largely ignored and left out of the welfare

policy discussions, they still experience paternalistic and racialized policy and behavioral expectations that reinforce rather than eliminate obstacles (2001). They contend that welfare to work programs are particularly difficult for certain populations because “the same racism-related obstacles that increased their chances of being poor decrease the likelihood of their being able to leave the welfare rolls” (p.182).

### **Long Term Joblessness**

In an op-ed piece about long term joblessness, Albert Bender considers it an “ongoing emergency” that has been consistent for decades; in fact, he believes the trend is nothing short of genocide (Bender, 2012). He demonstrates the effects of joblessness with examples from Germany in the 1930s where studies showed how unemployment eroded an individual’s self-respect and “generated despondency and depression” (p.2). In that study, research demonstrated a clear link from parental depression and low self-esteem to a sense of hopelessness in children. As a result, theft, gang activity, and criminality were rampant. Bender draws parallels between 1930’s Germany with the current reality of American Indians in both reservation and urban settings.

In an article for the Economic Policy Institute’s Economic Snapshot for Race and Ethnicity, Algernon Austin outlines the ways in which “Native Americans Are Still Waiting for an Economic Recovery” (Austin, 2013). Although the “great recession” supposedly ended several years ago, unemployment rates for American Indians remain

in double digits. Those rates were as high as 11.3% in the early part of 2013, while the unemployment rate for Whites “peaked at 9.1% in the first half of 2010” and lowered to 6.3% by 2013 (Austin, 2013).

### **Urban American Indians**

In an extensive exploratory study jointly commissioned by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, researchers interviewed directors of Urban Indian Centers from across the country. The Minneapolis American Indian Opportunities Industrialization Center (AIOIC), located minutes away from the Little Earth Community, participated in this May 2014 study. Participants were asked a series of questions aimed at understanding the unique needs of Urban Indian populations. In particular, the goal of the study was to identify population needs related to social services and to understand the barriers to accessing those services and programs (Westat, 2014).

The study revealed that needs for the urban American Indian populations were not significantly different from those of other low and no income populations. Basic needs such as food, housing, and clothing were listed. Assistance with navigating the required paperwork and verification processes were identified as another need. Also, education and job training support and health service supports were listed. The primary difference for this particular population was identified as “an expressed need to reconnect with their cultural heritage...” (Westat, p.vii).

The Westat study findings clearly identified unique areas of distress stemming from historical government lead and government sanctioned traumas that include systematic genocide, forced relocation programs that were “inhospitable to traditional self-sufficiency activities...”(p.xi), and forced assimilation programs that attempted to destroy languages and cultural practices. According to the study, many urban American Indians choose not to seek support and do not attempt to access available services for two main reasons: “because of a distrust of the government and an unwillingness to engage with government agencies” and also because some “individuals simply may not understand the service delivery system well enough to know how or where to request assistance.” (p.vii).

In addition to the needs assessment questions, Interviewees from the Westat study were asked to identify some of the “Promising Practices” that are helping to build bridges in ways that encourage their populations to access available services. There were five main practices that were identified as promising and effective: (1) Cultural Competency Training to prepare staff for understanding the needs of this unique population; (2) Actively hiring Native agency employees who not only understand the unique needs but represent a demonstrated desire to serve that particular community (3); Implement client Navigator programs that go beyond referrals and hand-offs, to actually accompany clients to the referred appointment; (4) Collaboration with Government agencies so that more resources can be accessed and that agencies can

gain trust and develop credibility within the community; (5) On Site Services or “Come to Indian Space”, so that clients are not required to leave their community to access social service programs.

### **Poverty and Economic Perspectives**

The United States government identified the federal relocation programs as economic development opportunities, but history demonstrates that assimilation was the real agenda supported and implemented by Bureau of Indian Affairs officials. Infinitely more sinister than mere “economic opportunity”, their real intentions were to weaken cultural connections. Author Nicholas Rosenthal says that in fact “BIA officials...implemented policies designed to break down tribal ties and to assimilate Indian people into the nation’s industrial and domestic economy.” It is interesting to note, that those practices first “tested” on American Indian populations were later expanded for the “Americanization” policies practiced on the large immigrant influx of the late 19th century (Rosenthal 2012, p.50).

Self-determination is a recurring theme regarding effective responses to the current socio-economic conditions. Tapping into culture and heritage as powerful resources, communities regularly identify the necessity of garnering the support to take care of their own and to create a policy that “enables Indian people to identify and serve the needs of their community as they see fit.” (Rosenthal, p. 51). As Rita Ledesma mentions in her article for the Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity In Social Work: “The

data indicate that the resources necessary for addressing conditions are embedded in the cultural fabric of the community” (p.52).

## **Training Manual Analysis**

### **The complex Public Assistance Process**

The Combined Manual of the Minnesota Department of Human Services is a comprehensive document that provides a detailed explanation of the process and conditions of eligibility under the various public assistance programs. While it is easily accessible online the details are difficult to navigate. The important provisions regarding the public assistance application process include verification, eligibility testing, benefit determination and an appeals process.

The Chapter 0010 of the manual describes the system of verification for each program and makes it clear that the burden of establishing eligibility is on the applicant. The applicant for public assistance has to undergo a detailed verification process, which includes both technical and procedural eligibility. Technical eligibility is for ensuring American citizenship and tribal affiliation. Little Earth residents generally meet the eligibility requirements. However, because the procedures are difficult to understand, many residents report being unclear about all the benefits they may be entitled to.

The Chapter 0012 of the Manual describes details for procedural eligibility.

Though the parameters considered for each of the programs are common, there exist differences in the norms fixed for each of these programs. Parameters considered are (i) age, (ii) employment and marital status of the applicant, (iii) net and gross income, (iv) assets owned by the applicant etc. There exist avenues for a number of exceptions and special category benefits under different public assistance programs. Further, as norms differ for different public assistance programs, qualifications for public assistance also differ. The process to determine the extent of benefits is also complex.

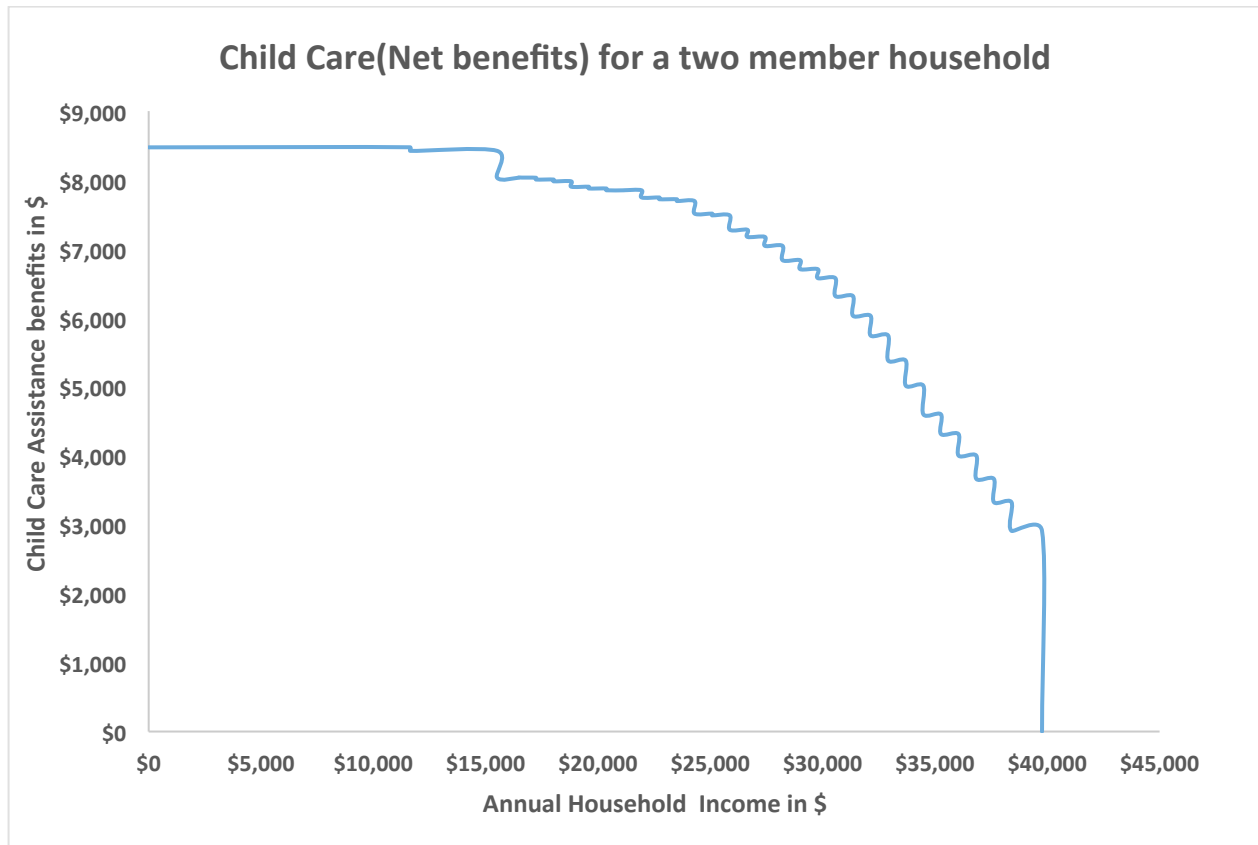
The Chapter 0022 explains detailed procedures for determining assistance levels for different programs. Income is the basic parameter to determine the extent of assistance amounts; however the process is further complicated by categorizing the applicant unit into: no income, earned income and unearned income, and prescribing different procedure for benefit determination. This Chapter also details provisions for appeals due to dissatisfaction of the applicant or beneficiary for disqualification from assistance, reduction of assistance or withdrawing assistance. Though the process appears simple, the procedures are like judicial proceedings, which may inhibit individuals from exercising their appeal options. The survey conducted by the Little Earth and analyzed by the Humphrey team also confirms that the process is complex and confusing.



## **Analysis of the Public Assistance Programs**

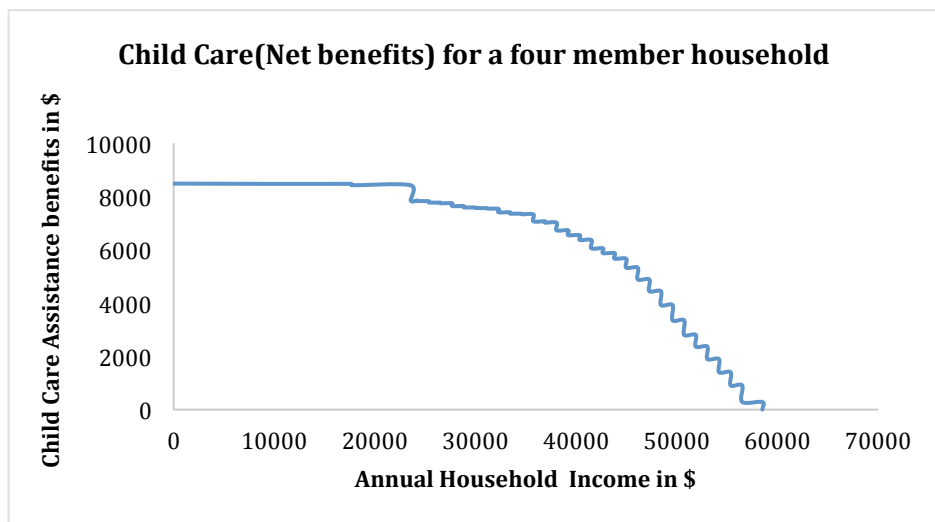
The benefits under the various public assistance programs automatically decrease as annual household income increases. This is a potential employment disincentive for families, who may choose to limit their income so that they remain below the transition threshold points. The threshold point depends upon a large number of factors including household size, the number of public assistance program benefits received, the annual household income etc. This threshold is different for each household size and public assistance program. For instance, the analysis of benefits under the Childcare Assistance Program (Figure-1) for a two-person household indicates a loss of childcare benefit of \$2,911, when the annual household income increases by one dollar from \$39,766 to \$39,767.

Figure-1:



A similar analysis of the benefits received by a two member household under various programs like the Housing & Urban Development (HUD) Program, Minnesota Family Investment Program (Cash + Food) and the Child care Assistance Program, indicates such threshold points act as disincentives and barriers for self-determination.

The following demonstrates childcare assistance threshold points for a family of four:



## Demographic Stakeholder and Survey Analysis

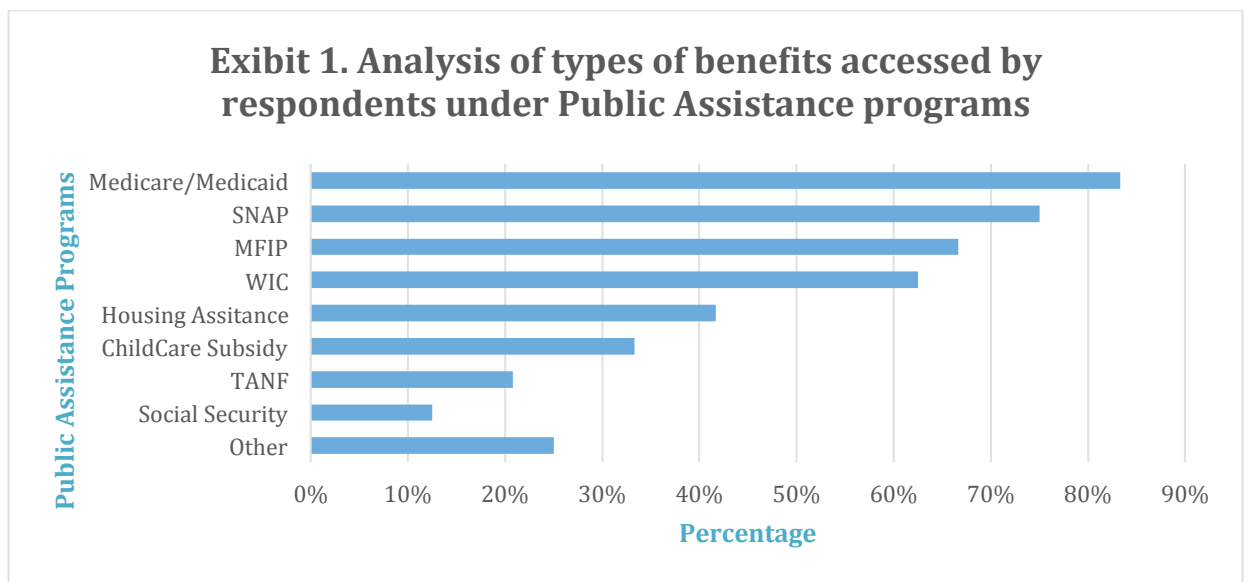
### Analysis of the Little Earth Survey

Following are the results of a 2014 survey conducted by Little Earth leadership as part of their program and needs assessment strategies. The purpose of the survey was to identify key components in decisions about employment and experiences with caseworkers. Little Earth leadership shared the results of this survey with the Humphrey team. The responses were coded for data entry and analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

### Types of benefits accessed by Little Earth residents

Regarding healthcare, 83% of the respondents had health care assistance, second only to housing in percentage of enrollment into public assistance programs. Only 34% of the respondents reported having social security assistance and TANF

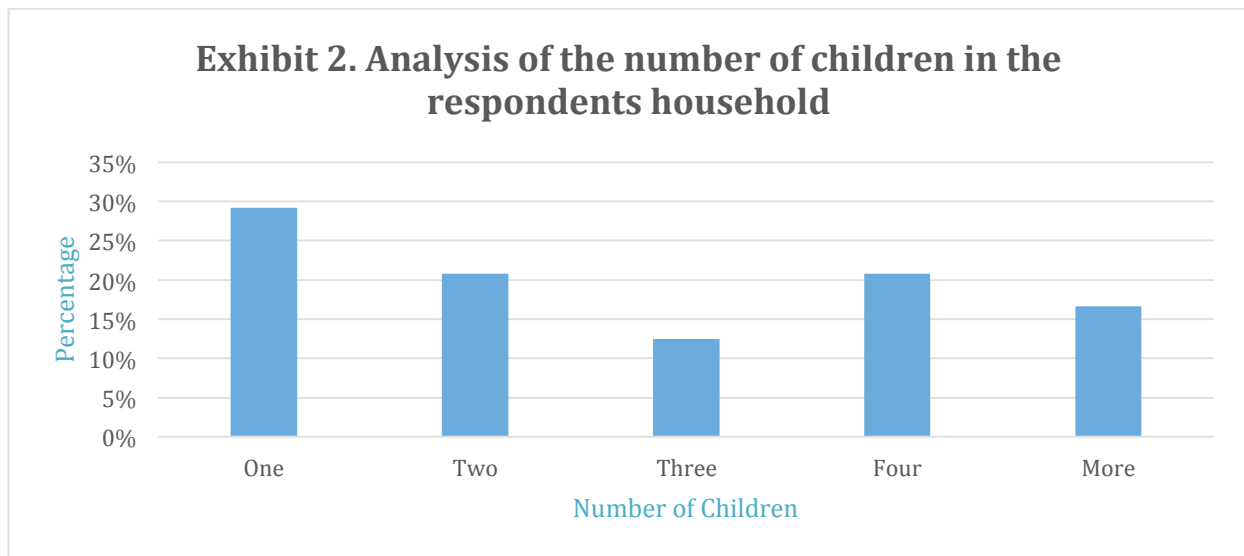
assistance respectively, which indicates the severity of insecurity and lack of support for families. Further, childcare assistance is received only by 33% of the respondents, which itself can be a limiting factor for full time employment, as over 50% of the respondents had at least two children. Exhibit 1 demonstrates the level and types of benefits survey respondents reported accessing:



### Number of Children in the Family

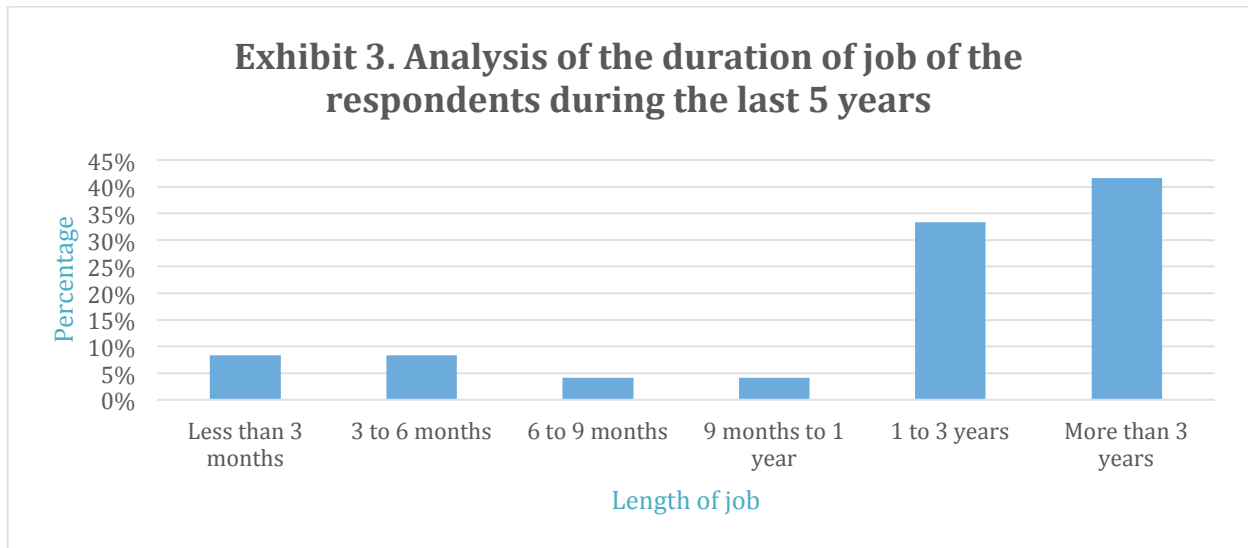
Of the survey respondents with children, 50% reported one or two child/ households, while 34% of the respondents reported three or four children each. Another 16% of the respondents had more than four children. The importance of childcare assistance is represented by the 18% of respondents who identified lack of childcare

assistance as the reason for leaving the job. Exhibit 2 demonstrates the number of children per household in the Little Earth Community:



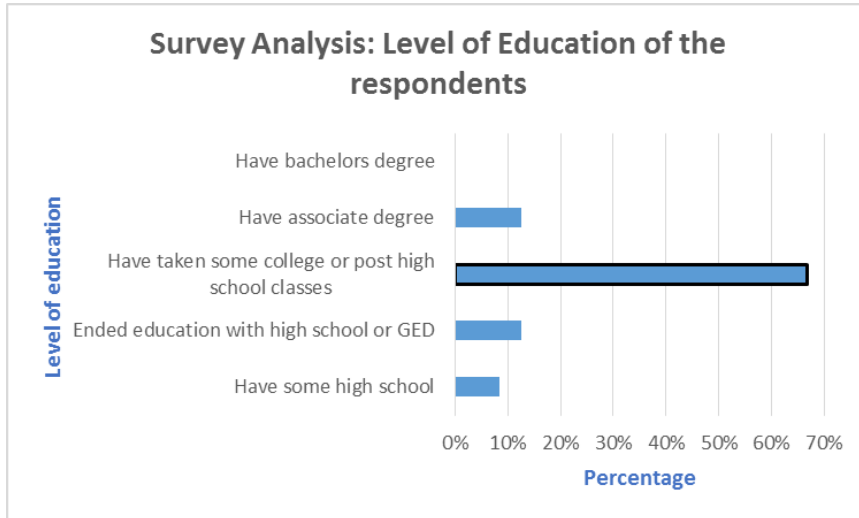
#### **Duration of employment in the past five years**

During the past five years, 42% of the respondents worked for more than three years and 33% of the respondents worked between one to three years. With the exception of three respondents who received associate degrees, respondents worked for an hourly wage ranging between \$8.75 and \$15. Exhibit 3 demonstrates the analysis of length of time respondents spent in jobs:



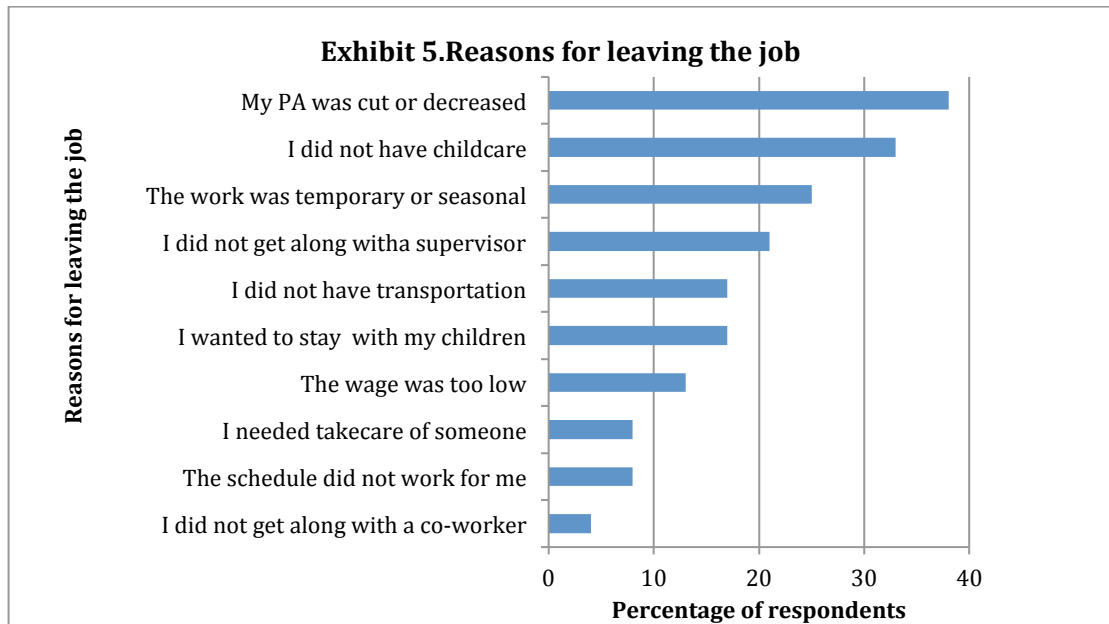
### Level of Education

The survey indicates that respondents achieved a moderate level of education. While 67% of the respondents had taken some college or post high school classes, none completed their degree. Only 13% of the respondents had completed an associate degree and none of them had completed a bachelor's degree. Exhibit 4 demonstrates the level of education completed by respondents:



### **Reasons for leaving the job**

Among the ten different reasons for leaving their job, the survey highlights two primary reasons which are directly related to Public assistance programs: “my PA was being cut or decreased if I continued working” and “I did not have childcare”. Incidentally, those two reasons were quoted by most of the survey respondents. The fact that 20% of the respondents left their job because of a decrease in public assistance demonstrates loss of benefits as a clear disincentive for employment. Additionally, another 18% of respondents left their job for want of childcare assistance. It also demonstrates that systemic barriers in receiving childcare assistance prevented Little Earth residents from seeking or keeping full time employments. Exhibit 5 demonstrates percentage of respondents and reasons for leaving their jobs:



### **Perception about Public Assistance programs**

The responses from Little Earth residents regarding the quality of Public Assistance programs and their personal experiences with access to those programs is outlined below:

- 79% of the respondents recorded negative experience due to long delays, hard and confusing procedures, unfriendly staff, loss of assistance and lack of transition time.
- 75% reported a loss of cash assistance as a major concern. Some had problems with childcare, SNAP, and healthcare assistance. One respondent became homeless.



- 50% knew about loss of assistance or reduction in assistance post facto, while 25% found out about their reduction of assistance from an employment counselor.
- 42% suggested a smoother transition period or grace period to adjust, and another 25% suggested revisions in eligibility guidelines regarding up to date verification of employment status, extended daycare benefits, and longer medical benefits.
- 21% desired help in budgeting skills.

The above analysis indicates that public assistance programs were complex and confusing. Many of the respondents had unpleasant experiences either due to the complexity of the procedures or due to non-availability of assistance.

### **Recommendations and Future Action Plans**

Humphrey Team proposals include a series of recommendations directed towards three key stakeholder groups: Little Earth, Omniciye', and Policy Makers.

#### **Proposals for Little Earth**

As mentioned, Little Earth of United Tribes remains an innovative and effective program that supports urban American Indian populations like no other program in the United States. However, there are some programmatic and operations level changes, as well as strategic level changes, that Little Earth can make to optimize their current practices. The following proposals are made based on findings from this study:

**Programmatic proposals for Little Earth** include developing workshops aimed at teaching residents how to start saving and how to build wealth. Survey respondents frequently indicated a lack of budgeting and financial literacy. Programs designed with culturally appropriate practices aligned with self-determination beliefs can help prepare residents for transitioning out of public assistance.

Another programmatic proposal is to develop training programs for client navigators. Little Earth residents commented several times that they would like to have a person who could help them through the process of accessing public assistance. Particularly noteworthy was the desire to have an individual who understands American Indians from deep personal experience. Client navigators should be individuals with a unique combination of skills including the cultural background (from the community), the personal experience (having been through the Public Assistance process), and the developmental training to offer support to those reluctant participants. Client navigators could have a positive impact by helping needy people find their way through the government system in culturally specific and responsive ways.

As part of the programming activities, Little Earth leadership could also explore the possibility of engaging community elders to work as mentors or leaders. For urban American Indians, maintaining cultural connections is of primary importance, and elders are valued for maintaining and teaching cultural traditions. With a formal elder mentor program, new residents seeking support will find a familiar cultural sensibility.

**Operations proposals for Little Earth** include new record keeping initiatives.

To accurately monitor and demonstrate what is working with the Little Earth programs, the Humphrey research team suggests that the Little Earth leadership maintain an up-to-date resident database. This database will gather information of present and previous community residents. It is vitally important to maintain a constant relationship with previous residents to know how they are doing economically and socially after they transition out of the Little Earth community. Additionally, we recommend that Little Earth maintain an alignment with the Omniciye' program. A close and trusted partnership will be mutually beneficial as you continue to make the case for individualized community support efforts.

**Strategic partnership proposals for Little Earth** will be necessary for their future vitality. The Humphrey team suggests that Little Earth cultivate strategic partnerships with larger players like local government, local business, and local education leaders. For example, Hennepin County recently announced a job mentorship program to help develop middle class workers. For this venture, Hennepin County has identified Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) as a primary partner. A strategic partnership with both Hennepin County and MCTC could position Little Earth job training participants into the mentorship process for better paying jobs.

Another example includes the 2014 White House initiative titled "Best Practices for Recruiting and Hiring the Long-Term Unemployed" ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)). For this

initiative, companies were asked to change their hiring practices in ways that resist discriminating against the long-term unemployed. To date, 300 companies have signed the pledge and have agreed to change their hiring practices. Several of those companies are in Minnesota. Approaching the companies to develop formal partnerships could help keep those companies accountable while also expanding employment opportunities for Little Earth residents.

### **Proposals for Omniciye'**

Our proposals for this program were focused on three major topics: Maintaining a client centered environment, continuing the cultural awareness model, and nurturing strategic partnerships.

**Client centered proposals for Omniciye'** are by necessity a continued work in progress. Funding sources and in-kind support from Hennepin County drive this program, but demonstrating success outcomes based on a client centered practice will help Omniciye' continue to expand. As mentioned previously, Omniciye' started as a pilot program with the intention of serving the 50 most needy Little Earth families. So far, Omniciye' is working very closely with 43 families. Increasing Omniciye' family support capacity gradually until it reaches the full 212 housing units within Little Earth is strongly recommended.

One major barrier to achieving that full capacity is the physical and psychological barrier represented by the entry door being locked during business hours. The research

shows that urban American Indians are already reluctant to access Public Assistance programs in general. A locked door could further alienate those reluctant applicants. The locked door is apparently a data privacy requirement, but perhaps one way to work around that issue would be to have a trained client navigator stationed outside of the entry, someone who is available to greet clients, help them get familiarized with the process, and help them gain access to the space.

As part of the client center proposal, the Humphrey team suggests that Omniciye' create a welcome orientation for new Little Earth residents. In this orientation, new Little Earth residents could learn about the services and support programs Omniciye' offers.

**Cultural awareness proposals for Omniciye'** are largely intended as an acknowledgement of what is working and encouragement to keep going. Little Earth survey responses demonstrate that experiences with Omniciye' staff have been positive. The challenges come for Little Earth residents when they are required to leave the community and go "downtown" to access support services. We strongly suggest that Omniciye' continue building relationships based on trust and cultural understanding, and to expand the support systems to include single and elderly residents. As a way to do this, we encourage Omniciye' to keep participating actively in Little Earth community events and activities. The Humphrey team has proposed that the Little Earth Leadership develop a program for training community client navigators. We suggest that Omniciye' take advantage of these newly skilled workers and employ them. This program will train

people to help clients successfully prepare to apply for and receive the services they need.

**Strategic partnership proposals for Omniciye'** are linked to similar recommendations for Little Earth. The Humphrey team suggests that Omniciye' build strategic partnerships with institutions like Hennepin County, The Department of Human Services, and local and national urban American Indian communities. In addition to developing programs that target explicitly this unique population and its specific needs, these partnerships will help demonstrate to American Indians, and in particular Little Earth residents, that they can trust and safely approach any government service office. Developing long term and solid collaborations with government agencies is a time-intensive effort that will be more fruitful with the support and commitment of high ranking leaders, especially as continued funding and government support is directly linked to clearly demonstrated success outcomes.

### **Proposals for Policy Makers**

The focus for Policy Makers is similar to the areas of concentration for Omniciye'. These areas include the further development of a client centered approach, understanding the unique cultures that make up site specific initiatives, and maintaining strategic partnerships that nurture innovation. This set of proposals recommends a concentration on continued financial and staffing supports along with an acknowledgement of successful outcomes.

**Client centered proposals for Policy Makers** primarily requires improving accessibility to programs. Making requirements less restrictive, stretching eligibility and transitional periods, incrementally tapering benefit reductions, and allowing asset accumulation are all recommended. These changes would allow clients to stabilize and develop self-reliance before a drastic drop in benefits is experienced by achieving a specific level of income. In addition to improving accessibility, our research shows that clients or assistance-seekers find the process very lengthy and complicated. Therefore, we suggest that policy makers consider simplifying the application processes.

**Understanding Culture proposal for Policy Makers** is crucial for continued programmatic success. In order to give a more individual and sensitive service to the American Indian population, we suggest that social service offices train their caseworkers on culturally specific issues. Programs like Omniciye' can serve as incubator sites for training and development. Studies have demonstrated a clear disconnect between caseworker training—which is focused on neutral transaction only encounters—and meeting client needs—which is based on authentic relationships and trust building. The Humphrey team suggests continued mandatory development programs that incorporate cultural awareness and education. These training programs should become a regular part of ongoing staff training.

**Strategic partnerships proposals for Little Policy Makers** require allowing site-specific programs like Omniciye' to have more autonomy. The Omniciye' "Life

Coaches” are often bound by restrictive policies and guidelines that prevent them from fully supporting the needs of the Little Earth families. With more programmatic autonomy Omniciye’ has the capacity to truly tailor their program to fit the needs of the Little Earth community. Working in partnership with the community will allow state and county policy makers to be seen as supporters and allies, and will help to eliminate the negative perception of “going downtown” for assistance. One suggestion that can be adopted immediately is working to encourage middle-class job training experiences. For example, Hennepin County has recently announced a job mentorship program aimed at reaching low income populations, there is some concern that participation may negatively impact public assistance support for little earth families, removing this barrier—real or perceived, would be mutually beneficial for all parties.

### **Conclusion**

Our research has clearly demonstrated that current government policies, procedures, and sanctions maintain and reinforce rather than resolve issues of poverty and long-term joblessness. For the most vulnerable and marginalized populations—including those who reside in the Little Earth community— relationships built on trust and authentic engagement are essential requirements for making a positive difference. Significant numbers of caseworkers are ill prepared to meet those genuine relationship expectations for a variety of reasons including overwhelming caseloads. Training based on neutral transactions intended to standardize the assistance support process, is



instead alienating families and preventing them from seeking Public Assistance support. This is especially true for urban American Indian communities with a long history of distrust for government programs. A process focused on rule enforcement and compliance, completing forms and processing paperwork, will never successfully reach those marginalized populations.

The Little Earth and Omniciye' programs have demonstrated innovative solutions that can lead policy makers to develop more effective Public Assistance support systems that help stabilize families and help communities transition out of poverty. Developing decentralized satellite programs embedded in a specific community and equipped with the staff, resources, tools, knowledge, and capacity to effectively support that community, will be better prepared to respond to community needs. The Humphrey team has outlined a series of promising practices and recommendations that can be expanded and replicated in support of the greater community good.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Limited by time constraints, there were several areas that given more time and resources, the Humphrey team would have liked to explore. As our recommendations included continued relationships with the University of Minnesota and the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, this team would like to encourage further study and exploration in the following areas:

- An examination of the correlation between poverty, joblessness, and educational attainment; particularly the access to opportunities in higher education
- A cost/benefit analysis of the current Public Assistance programs compared to the cost savings promised by innovative solutions
- A detailed stakeholder analysis on the policy/decision maker level that identifies who to approach for change strategy implementation
- An examination of current cultural awareness training programs for caseworker, and an identification of promising and effective new training strategies

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